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SCIENTIFIC NEWS.

What Is an Acquired Character?—I suppose that I am the person to whom Prof. Nutting refers (December, p. 1009) as "the member" who, at the Rochester meeting, "had the temerity to confess that he was not sure that he knew the exact nature of an 'acquired character.'" I have been strongly impressed with the feeling that argument against the position of Weismann and his followers is useless, from the method of these writers in explaining away whatever proofs of the hereditability of acquired characters one may bring forward. The definitions of an acquired character are themselves sufficiently vague and various, but the treatment of individual instances by the Neo-Darwinians seems to preclude the possibility of argument. Prof. Ward has well said that Weismann's "treatment of this point (hereditability of acquired characters) often borders on the dogmatic." The practice seems to be to use the definition as a stalking-horse to shield the philosopher from the onslaughts of his opponents. If he is driven into a corner it is easy enough to say that the character in question is not acquired, but that there existed a predisposition to it; and while he cannot afford any proof of the assertion and may not be able to bring forward any reason for it beyond its convenience as a method of escape, his opponent cannot dislodge him from his position. It seems to me, as I said at Rochester, that much of this argument is but a war of words; and Prof. Nutting has precisely indicated my own difficulties concerning it.

I have been growing plants for a single generation in soils of different chemical composition, the seeds having been taken from the same fruit. These plants show characteristic differences, and when the seeds from the different lots are sown in one soil the resulting plants show that some of the novel characters become hereditary for a generation or more. If I were to bring these experiments forward as proof of the transmission of acquired characters, my opponents would simply say, "Oh, well, these are not acquired characters; there was a predisposition to them."

I may remark here that an inexhaustible field for study of contemporaneous evolution is afforded by common cultivated plants; and if we are to consider acquired characters in the Darwinian sense, I fancy that no one could long be a horticulturist without becoming a confirmed believer in their transmission.—L. H. Bailey, Cornell University.

The Geological Survey of Alabama.—The Legislature four years ago reduced the tax rate, unwisely, as now appears, for it has caused the money in the treasury to run now about $200,000 short of what is needed to carry on the affairs of the State. When the present Legislature met and was confronted with this deficiency in the treasury, the first thought was to reduce the expenses of the State within the present income by retrenching in every direction. Accordingly a number of bills were introduced aiming to cut off everything that we could possibly do without. Among these bills was one prohibiting the payment of any money to the survey for the next two years, saving $15,000 on this item. Many of the members both of the House and of the Senate were disposed to support this wholesale retrenchment if by it the raising of the tax rate could be avoided; for the raising of the rate would be an unpopular measure as a matter of course, and would be made the most of by the enemies of the party in power. Upon closer examination it has become perfectly evident to every one that the tax rate must be raised, for all the retrenchment proposed and in any way possible will fall far short of remedying the trouble. But some of the members are afraid to vote for raising the rate without, as an offset, voting to cut down every expense in the State to its minimum. While it is not likely that the extreme measures at first proposed will pass, there may have to be some compromise that will cut off part of the sum usually coming to the survey. There is no one fighting the survey, for the sentiment is very favorable to us, but they may have to show that they have economized.—EUGENE A. SMITH.

Recent Deaths.—John Obadiah Westwood, M. A., F. L. S., honorary president of the British Entomological Society, died January 1. Prof. Westwood was born in Sheffield in 1805. He was educated at Litchfield and was appointed in 1861 to the professorship of zoology founded at Oxford by the munificence of the late Rev. F. W. Hope.

In 1855 the Royal Society awarded him one of the royal medals for his scientific works, and in 1860 he was elected to fill the place of the illustrious Humboldt as corresponding member of the Entomological Society at Paris. He wrote "Introduction to the Modern Classification of Insects," "Entomologists' Text Book," published in 1838; "British Butterflies and Their Transformations" in 1841, and a number of other works of a similar nature. The number of his memoirs on special groups of insects is large, and he introduced many important forms to the scientific record.

Prof. J. G. Joessel, of the University of Strasburg, is dead. He was born April 27, 1839, and was ordinary professor of anatomy.